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ABSTRACT

To learn more about how people read literary texts, with a view to improving the way literature is taught in schools, a study examined the extent to which the reading of literature is affected by variations in readers, texts, and situations. Subjects, 12 skilled (faculty) readers and 96 novice (undergraduate) readers, read a short story, either in its original version or in a version in which textual "evaluations" (figurative language) had been replaced by nonevaluative phrases. Participants read the story in conjunction with one of two orienting tasks, a plot-related question to induce "story-driven" reading or a frame-related question to induce "point-driven" reading. Results indicated that readers of evaluated text tended to prefer phrases containing discourse evaluations to a greater extent than readers of paraphrased text preferred the corresponding phrases. Results also indicated that what readers found most striking in a literary text was influenced by characteristics of the text--in this case, its evaluative structure. However, readers' sensitivity to evaluative language was modified by the situation in which the reading occurred, oral or silent. Other results indicated that readers given the frame question were in greater disagreement about the story than were the readers given the plot question. The effect of the frame task was to make the undergraduates' responses more closely resemble those of the faculty readers. Findings direct attention to the possibility of point-driven literature instruction. (A table of evaluative sentences and their corresponding paraphrases and references are attached.) (NKA)

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Contextualizing the Text:

The Contribution of Readers, Texts and Situations

to Aesthetic Reading

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ABSTRACT

To achieve a fuller understanding of literary reading, this interdisciplinary study attempts to blend the literary-humanist and cognitive-empirical methods of investigation. This work is informed by a transactional model which suggests that three participating entities -- the reader, the text, and the situation -- jointly shape reading events, which can in turn be categorized as primarily "information-," "story-," or "point-driven." To test the model, novice (undergraduate) and skilled (faculty) readers read a short story either in its original version or in a version in which textual "evaluations" had been replaced by nonevaluative paraphrases. A "situational" manipulation entailed drawing the readers' attention to story-level concerns or else encouraging them to construct a "point" connecting the text to a framing letter. Analysis of responses to two tasks -- one in which readers were asked to select "striking" phrases and another in which they were asked to respond to statements about the story -- offer support for such a model of literary reading. It is suggested that literature teaching should consider literary meaning to be a function not of texts alone, nor even of readers and texts, but of readers, texts, and situations.

Contextualizing the Text:
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Purpose

The purpose of this research is to learn more about how people read literary texts, with a view to improving the way literature or literary reading is taught in schools.

Theoretical position

To date, most studies of literary reading have been speculative "armchair" investigations by philosophers and literary scholars. Cognitive psychologists and others have conducted more empirically oriented studies of text processing, of course, but usually under the assumption that the reader's prime goal is to learn from text. Although this is true of some types of reading, it is not generally the case that people read literature in order to acquire information. In order to achieve a fuller understanding of literary reading, therefore, it is necessary to blend the literary-humanist and cognitive-empirical traditions. The work described here is interdisciplinary in that sense.

More specifically, the research is informed by a model that regards reading as a complex transaction involving three participating entities: the reader, the text, and the situation in which the reading occurs. The model is similar to Rosenblatt's (1978) in its suggestion that individual reading events are dominated by one of several stances or "modes." Rosenblatt distinguishes between the efferent stance, in which the reader's goal is to carry information away from the text, and the aesthetic stance, in which the goal is the lived-through experience of the work. The theory under consideration here further distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic reading. In story-driven mode, the reader's goal is immersion in the storyworld of events and characters. In point-driven mode, the reader's goal is to construct a plausible point for the text, to come to an understanding of what the narrator might be "getting at." This kind of reading is analogous to the way people usually listen to stories told in conversation. Sociolinguists have shown that conversational narrators typically include "evaluations" in order to help convey their intended points (Labov, 1972; Polanyi, 1985). Pratt (1977) and others have shown that literary texts, too, are heavily evaluated. For example, striking or otherwise unexpected lexical choices such as metaphors tend to function evaluatively.

Method

The purpose of the experiment was to determine whether and to what extent the reading of literature is affected by variations in readers, texts, and situations. Accordingly, novice and skilled participants read different versions of a short story under different task conditions. Multiple dependent measures were used in order to investigate both "process" and "response" activities. The variables of reader, text, and situation were manipulated as follows:

Reader manipulation. In the main experiment, 96 undergraduates participated. Twelve faculty members, each from a different academic discipline, formed a comparison group.

Text manipulation. Naeve Brennan's (1969) story, "The Day We Got Our Own Back," was presented either in its original version or in an alternate version in which many of the evaluations were replaced by nonevaluative paraphrases. ("Evaluations" refer to figurative language and to other unexpected lexical or syntactic choices: for a list of some of the evaluative phrases appearing in this story, and their "nonevaluative" paraphrases, see Table 1.)

Situational manipulation. Participants read the story in

conjunction with one of two orienting tasks. In the plot task, the readers were, after every page of reading, asked a plot-related question, such as "What do you think might happen next?" The purpose of this task was to induce "story-driven" reading, as defined above. In the second, or frame task, the readers were, before reading, handed a fictitious "letter" in which the letter writer recommended the story to someone else, as illuminating the situation they were living in. After every page, the readers were asked whether they saw any connections between the story and this framing letter. The purpose of this task was to induce "point-driven" reading.

Design. In addition to text and situational variables, the experiment included a modality factor: participants read the story either silently or aloud. Thus the design was a 2x2x2 factorial, in which the variables were text (evaluated vs. nonevaluated), task (plot task vs. frame task), and modality (silent vs. oral reading). Twelve undergraduates were assigned at random to each cell of the design. Additionally, 12 faculty members participated in the evaluated text/frame task/silent modality condition.

Results

Results for only two of the tasks will be described here.

Phrase selection task

After each page of reading the participants were shown a list of phrases from that page and asked to indicate which they had noticed particularly while reading. For readers who had read the original, evaluated version of the story, half the phrases on this task contained evaluations and half were control items. (For readers who had read the nonevaluative, paraphrased version of the story, half the items were nonevaluative paraphrases of the evaluative items, and the other half were control items.)

For the Phrase Selection Task two sets of analyses of variance were conducted. In the first set -- which we refer to as the "text-task-modality analysis" -- the experiment was considered a 2 (evaluated vs. paraphrased text) x 2 (frame vs. plot task) x 2 (silent vs. oral modality) factorial, with 96 novice readers as the subjects. In the second set of analyses -- which we refer to as the "reader analysis" -- the 12 skilled readers were compared with the 12 novice readers who had participated in the same experimental condition (i.e., evaluated text/frame task/silent modality). These were therefore one-way analyses of variance, with

ability (novice vs. skilled) as the single between-subjects factor. Unless noted otherwise, all the effects reported here are significant beyond the .01 level.

Text-task-modality analysis. Signal detection analysis (d') was used to assess the sensitivity of readers to evaluative (or paraphrased) items. Analysis of variance of the d' scores revealed a significant evaluation effect, $F(1,88) = 28.13$. Readers of evaluated text showed greater sensitivity (mean d'=.030) to the critical items than did the readers of paraphrased text (mean d' = -.019). In other words, readers of evaluated text tended to prefer phrases containing discourse evaluations to a greater extent than readers of paraphrased text preferred the corresponding paraphrases. This finding supports our contention that discourse evaluations are a salient aspect of literary texts.

The analysis also revealed a significant three-way interaction involving text, task, and modality, $F(1,88) = 4.14$, $p < .05$. Although the evaluation effect was weaker for the frame readers who read silently than it was for any of the other three combinations of task and modality, the generality of the main conclusion -- that discourse evaluations are salient -- is not seriously compromised by this result. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Reader analysis. There was no significant difference between skilled and novice readers on this task.

These results indicate that what readers find most striking in a literary text is influenced by characteristics of the text -- in this case, by its "evaluative" structure. At the same time, however, readers' sensitivity to evaluative language is modified by the situation in which the reading occurs -- in this case, by task demands and by modality. These results go part way, therefore, towards validating the reader-text-situation model outlined above.

Probe task

After reading, the participants were presented with 9 statements that "other people have made about this story," and asked to agree or disagree with each, strongly or otherwise. The statements were designed such that, intuitively, they differentiated between story- and point-driven reading. Finally, they were asked to explain their choice. All responses were made orally. The probes were always given in the same order. Agreement and disagreement responses were coded on a 5-point scale, with higher numbers indicating a more "point-driven" response. Thus, each reader received a "point-driven" score for each statement, as well as an average score for

the 9 statements combined.

We expected that evidence of a more point-driven type of response would be found for skilled readers, as well as for novices who were given either the frame task, the evaluated text, or both.

Text-task-modality analysis. Here we will overlook responses to the separate probes, and consider only the overall probe score, which is the average of the 9 responses. On this global score there was a significant main effect for task, $F(1,88) = 4.78$, $p < .05$. Readers given the frame task were in greater disagreement (i.e., were more "point-driven") than the readers given the plot task (the means were 3.56 and 3.36, respectively). Thus, as predicted, the situational manipulation of embedding the text in a pragmatic frame had the effect of producing more "point-driven" responses on this task. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Reader analysis. Skilled readers disagreed with the probes to a significantly greater extent than did the novices, $F(1, 22) = 8.49$. The means were 4.02 for the 12 skilled readers, 3.51 for the 12 novices.

In general, then, readers given the frame task responded to the probes in a more point-driven way than readers given the plot task. Skilled readers (the faculty members) were more point-driven in their

responses than the undergraduates. In short, the effect of the frame task was to make the undergraduates' responses more closely resemble those of the faculty members.

Conclusions

Theoretical significance

These results provide support for the view that the reading of literature is a complex function of readers, texts, and situations. They also indicate that it is useful to distinguish different types of reading transaction (e.g., story- vs. point-driven modes). More generally, this work indicates that it is possible to study literary reading empirically: the theoretical cross-fertilization between literary and experimental traditions appears to be a productive one.

Practical significance

As Rosenblatt (1978) has pointed out, the teaching of literature has in the past been dominated by what could be called information-driven assumptions: students typically have been asked comprehension questions, or asked about what might be "learned from" a work of literature. More recently, teaching has been increasingly influenced by what we would call story-driven assumptions. Students are asked questions concerning the motivations of characters or the plausibility of the plot; or else they

are invited to search for the story's "theme."

The present research directs attention to the possibility of point-driven literature teaching, in which meaning is not seen as something to be located in the text, but instead as something to be negotiated between readers and texts within situational constraints -- just as the "point" of a conversational story must be negotiated between narrator and audience in a conversational situation. In such an approach to literature teaching, then, students would be encouraged to see texts as fluid and open -- opportunities to engage in transactions with other human beings, rather than objects to be "believed" or even "comprehended." Finally, the present research lends support to the view that "contextualizing" the literary text -- locating it in a believable pragmatic situation -- provides a kind of scaffolding that can help students towards a more rewarding literary experience.

Table 1

Some sentences containing discourse evaluations (and their corresponding paraphrases) in "The Day We Got Our Own Back." (Evaluated phrases are italicized; paraphrases are in parentheses. Empty parentheses indicate that the evaluation in question was deleted in the paraphrased version.)

1 He was *on the run* (), sleeping one night in one house and the next night in another, and sometimes stealing home to see us.

2 They *crowded* (came) into our narrow little hall, and *tramped* (walked) around the house, upstairs and downstairs, looking everywhere and asking questions.

3 Emer, my elder sister, and *my mother's chief prop* (usually a great help to my mother), was out doing errands.

4 After the men had searched the house, they *crowded* (came) into the room where I sat, from which they could watch the street.

5 They *camped* (sat) around the room, talking idly among themselves and waiting.

6 She feared that my father would risk a visit home and that he would be *trapped* (caught), and that we would see *him trapped* (it).

7 I stopped threading and began to think, but my mother *flew across the room at him* (moved quickly across the room toward him).

8 Suddenly my mother, thinking of Derry, alone in the room above, *abandoned her wall and darted to the door* (moved quickly toward the door) leading to the stairs, but one of the men was before her, with his revolver raised against her.

9 Again my mother *retreated* (went back) to her wall, and I returned to my necklace, and the men continued their talk.

10 Listening to her, I was once again *spellbound with gratitude, excitement, and astonishment* (gratified, excited, and astonished) that the strange man had included me in the raid.

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